NEW YORK POST OCT 26 1962

The Decision Is Made

MARQUIS CHILDS

Washington.

The drama of the final hours leading up to President Kennedy's address to the nation on Monday evening was of an order such as comes only rarely when a nation and its people and its leaders are put through a supreme ordeal.

For six days the decision to be taken had been debated in the closest secrecy among the President's most trusted advisers. At times there were nine or 10 men around the table, sometimes 11 or 12. The President's brother, Attorney General Kennedy, present at almost every session, was one of the most vigorous debaters.

During this intense discussion, as one of the participants put it, everybody at one time or another disagreed with everyone else. Should the case for a blockade be taken to the UN and the Organization of American States before it was imposed? There were those who felt strongly that this was the proper procedure.

Others who carried the day, argued in the language of chess that the UN move was already blocked and it could end only in futility and a waste of precious time.

But, intensive and even heated though the debate was, reports of a sharp break between hard-line and soft-line advocates is baseless, according to the participants. Such reports have been circulated, aligning the President's adviser for security affairs, McGeorge Bundy, against Secretary of State Rusk. Both men deny it.

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As the decision for an immediate naval blockade was at last approved by the President the crisis moved into another phase — ratification. On Monday afternoon first the National Security Council, then the Cabinet and finally at 5 p.m. the Congressional leaders filed in and out of the Cabinet room.

From every corner of the country, most of them veterans of the rough and tumble of the hustings in the heat of a political campaign, they had been summoned to Washington. So well had the secret been kept that without exception they had no knowledge of the decision the President had taken, with all its incalculable consequences and which two hours later he was to announce to the world.

For one of the 16 men so hastily brought to Washington this confrontation had a special element of drama. Sen. Fulbright of Arkansas, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had been about to dedicate a fish farm experiment station at Stuttgart, Ark., one of the pleasant chores of a political campaign.

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Cuba had been injected into Fulbright's campaign for reelection by his Republican opponent, Dr. Kenneth Jones, an orthopedic surgeon. Jones, backed in his campaign by the generous wealth of Winthrop Rockefeller, charges that it was Fulbright's advice that resulted in cancelling the Bay of Pigs operation and that this in turn led to the fiasco of April, 1961.

But, as both the President and the Senator sitting across from him understood, Fulbright had warned well in advance of the almost-certain failure of the Bay of Pigs operation since it would not rally the support of the Cuban people. That warning, in the form of a memorandum summing up the Cuban situation, was handed to the President at least 10 days before the decision was reached to give the invasion limited support. While it had impressed the President and he had invited Fulbright to the final conference, the weight of the Central Intelligence Agency and the military on the other side was overwhelming.

The Fulbright memorandum might have resulted in calling off the attempt or it might have persuaded the President to give all-out American support to an invasion which could never under the circumstances have produced an internal uprising. In either event, the course of the Cuban tragedy would have been different.